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South Africa's Bomb

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WASHINGTON—Buttressed by fresh scientific information that adds to the evidence South Africa and Israel exploded a nuclear device in September 1979, Michigan congressman John Conyers will attach an amendment to the sanctions bill now pending in the House to formally break off nuclear trade between the two nations.

This legislation would adversely affect several American companies, including Bechtel, Westinghouse, and General Dynamics. Secretary of Defense Weinberger and Secretary of State Shultz, of course, come from Bechtel.

Even though the U.S. has gone out of its way to pretend it doesn't know Pretoria has the bomb, there has never been any secret about South Africa's nuclear capabilities and the U.S. role in developing them. South Africa obtained its nuclear research reactor directly from the U.S. Its Westinghouse-designed nuclear power reactor was purchased from the French. A pilot uranium-enrichment plant that employs American-made computers was obtained from West Germany. Both reactors produce plutonium as a by-product, and the research reactor is run on weapons-grade uranium. South Africa has refused to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty or to submit its enrichment plant to any international safeguards against weapons development. A. I. Roux, president of South Africa's Atomic Energy Board, was straightforward in 1976 when he said, "We can ascribe our degree of advancement [in nuclear technology] today in large measure to the training and assistance so willingly provided by the United States."

Not only can South Africa make nuclear weapons, it has ample capacity to deliver them: from Mirage III jets, purchased from the French; its Buccaneer or Canberra bombers, obtained from the British; via Israeli-designed Jericho mis-

siles, and by 155mm howitzers bought from the U.S.

Suspicion that South Africa had the bomb was raised in the summer of 1977 when the Soviets told the Carter administration its satellite photographs indicated South Africa was getting ready to detonate a nuclear device in the Kalahari desert. U.S. data subsequently confirmed the Soviet photos. The western nations told South Africa not to explode the bomb, and apparently South Africa complied.

On September 22, 1979, the U.S. Air Force Vela satellite detected a double flash of light, which can be the signal of a nuclear explosion, in the South Atlantic-Indian Ocean area. Soon after the Vela sighting Jimmy Carter's science adviser Dr. Frank Press impaneled a group of scientists led by Jack Ruina of MIT to figure out what happened. It was hard to discount the Vela data since the satellite was designed specifically to detect nuclear weapons tests and had a perfect record, having sighted 41 previous nuclear explosions in 15 years of operation. The satellite had been calibrated one week prior to the explosion.

Various government agencies eventually concluded that South Africa, probably in consort with Israel, had exploded a nuclear device. They included the U.S. Naval Research Laboratory [NRL], which conducted the most comprehensive examination; the Defense Intelligence Agency, the Los Alamos Scientific Laboratory, as well as individuals in the departments of State and Energy. The CIA said South Africa and Israel were responsible for the test.

But not the Ruina panel, which adopted the "zoo" theory. That's jargon for a phenomena which can't be explained. "Although we cannot rule out the possibility that this signal was of nuclear origin," the report said, "the panel considers it more likely that the signal was one of the zoo events, possibly a consequence of the impact of a small meteoroid on the satellite."

The U.S. waited three weeks after the Vela reading to begin its search for radioactivity, more than enough time for the fallout to be dissipated by rainfall.

Now there's new information. NRL documents obtained through a Freedom of Information request by the Washington Office on Africa, a public interest group, contain detailed data of the blast. Possibly the most significant evidence is contained in what must have been a most

unwelcome letter to Dr. Alan Berman, NRL's research director, from a University of Tennessee professor who happened to be examining sheep thyroids in Australia soon after the blast. Dr. L. Van Middlesworth wrote Dr. Berman in September 1980 that he had routinely examined cattle and sheep tissues for such elements for 25 years, and that his sample of sheep thyroids for November 12 and 13, 1979, contained what he thought were unusually high levels of radioactive iodine, which his measurements set at six times the standard deviation above average. He said it was the first time he had ever detected iodine in the thyroids of sheep.

An analysis of the weather patterns, including cloud trajectory, indicated radioactive fallout could have been carried from the area of the flash and dropped on Victoria or Tasmania in Australia.

Why did the Carter administration cover up the South African blast? Had it been known that Israel had the bomb, that knowledge could have destroyed the Camp David accords, put pressure on the president to cut off military aid, and hurt Carter in getting Jewish votes during his heated primary campaign against Senator Edward Kennedy. Carter may have thought that revealing the existence of a South African bomb and the ensuing confrontation could scuttle chances for a peaceful Zimbabwe independence settlement. Another foreign policy setback amid the Iranian hostage crisis would have been too much for Carter to contemplate. Such a revelation would have shown the big holes in non proliferation policy, and exposed decades of American assistance to both Israel and South Africa in obtaining the bomb. And at the very least it would have made Carter look silly since the Vela data became known at the same time that a South African delegation landed in Washington to discuss the Antarctica treaty. The treaty prohibits testing military weapons and nuclear explosives in Antarctica. The South African blast emanated from Antarctica or close by.

Cordial relations between the U.S. and South Africa continue in the nuclear arena. Despite South Africa's steadfast refusal to adhere to the nuclear non proliferation treaty and accept International Atomic Energy Agency safeguards, the Reagan government granted an export license to Control Data Corporation to sell South Africa's Center of Industrial and Scientific Research an advanced comput-

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er to model nuclear explosions. Two U.S. companies—Edlow International and SWOCO—act as brokers in the sale of enriched uranium fuel for South African reactors. Nuclear technicians go back and forth between the U.S. and South Africa, and the U.S. actually has trained South African technicians. In the past South Africa has sent raw uranium to the U.S. to be enriched and returned.

As for the black resistance within South Africa, Prime Minister Botha must have been thinking about the blast on September 25, 1979, three days after it went off, when, speaking in Cape Town, he said South Africa might possess a secret weapon to counter "terrorism." "If there are people who are thinking of doing something else," he declared, "I suggest they think twice about it. They might find out we have military weapons they do not know about." ■